

## The Critique of Theology

The argument of the Transcendental Dialectic has demonstrated that there is no science of rational psychology and that the province of any rational cosmology is strictly limited. There is no way of discerning infinity within experience or its absence and also no way of demonstrating that there either is freedom or that there is not (but since it is at least *not inconceivable* we can suppose it and hence we are introduced to the notion of noumena). Similarly we cannot demonstrate it would appear that there is a necessary being in the world. However whilst this last point seems well grounded on the basis of the fourth antinomy Kant goes on to consider the case for this notion at much greater length, as it is the basis of the supposed discipline of rational theology. The need for such a discipline is based on the comprehension that all that exists within the world is contingent and yet since contingency in general presupposes something necessary surely there is something necessary existent beyond all the contingent existences we are aware of and which supports the latter. Kant describes the notion of such a necessary being as *the transcendental ideal of pure reason* as it incorporates the notion of an existence that is necessary, perfect and all-sustaining.

In discussing the notion of rational theology Kant is, as elsewhere, considering only the arguments of speculative reason or of metaphysics (not any possible practical reasons there might be for supposing there to exist a necessary being). He suggests that there are in fact only three speculative arguments for the existence of God. (A590/B618-A591/B619)

Kant examines each of these arguments in turn beginning from the one that is furthest from how reason naturally arrives at the concept and ending with the most popular argument. Hence he starts by examining the ontological argument. In discussing this he sets out to persuade us of the difference between logical and ontological necessity. A logical necessity is the kind that follows from the demonstration of an argument whilst an ontological necessity would concern the requirements of certain beings. The ontological argument works by attempting to show us that the rejection of its conclusion will involve us in a self-contradiction. (That would be a logical necessity.) Kant however points out that self-contradiction only results if we accept that something is in fact given in the concept of the necessary being. (Hence the logical necessity would only apply if there is an ontological necessity.) But this is an invalid procedure: “There is already a contradiction in introducing the concept of existence—no matter under what title it may be disguised—into the concept of a thing which we profess to be thinking solely in reference to its possibility.” (A597/B625) What kind of proposition is involved in asserting that the necessary being exists? Is this an analytic judgment or a synthetic one? If it is analytic then the notion of existence adds nothing to the concept of the thing in question but in that case either the thought of the being is equivalent to the being or we have presupposed the existence of the thing we are supposedly proving to exist on the grounds that it is merely possible which demonstrates nothing. If however the proposition is, as involving existence it appears to be, a

synthetic one then it is evidently absurd to say that we cannot reject the notion of existence without contradiction.

In replying to this argument Kant demonstrates his fundamental convictions about the nature of concepts and how they connect to reality. For a predicate to add something to the concept of what we are describing it must not already be contained in the concept. But this is something that cannot be attained by the mere notion of existence. (A598/B626-A599/B627, being is not a real predicate to the argument about how nothing can be added by the notion of existence as if it were the object existing would not be identical to the one thought of.)

Thus we cannot by means of concepts alone arrive at the existence of anything. The only manner in which we can be assured of the existence of something is if, in addition to having a concept of it, we also are capable of intuiting it. Hence the notion of existence belongs only within the realm of possible experience and has no sense outside it. This demonstrates that the ontological proof is incapable of working.

Kant next moves on to the cosmological proof. He describes this briefly: A604/B632-A605/B633 (and note). This proof abstracts from all particular properties of the world and attempts to arrive at the notion of the necessary being through describing worldhood in the most general terms. However Kant argues that this proof surreptitiously depends upon the validity of the ontological argument. We cannot from experience derive the notion of the necessary being as it is not given to us in experience and hence in arriving at it we must transcend even the most general conditions of

worldhood and reach for pure concepts. Kant identifies a further nest of faulty assumptions involved in this argument: A609/B637-A610/B638. The basic problem with the argument is however capable of being summed up more quickly. Either we have the notion of necessity in experience in which case we should have begun by demonstrating this or if we do not then the reference to experience with which the argument begins is in fact a subterfuge and we are no more able to reach it by referring to existence in general than in examining the concept of the being itself which is what we end up doing in any case.

Both the ontological and the cosmological proofs are described by Kant as transcendental, meaning by this that they are attempts to arrive at the notion of the necessary being independently of empirical principles (even though the cosmological argument involves a pretence to the contrary). Kant argues that what is involved in both of them is an attempt to reconcile principles of necessity and contingency through the view that we have access to a way of constituting the world through our concepts (A616/B644).

Kant turns next to what he terms the physico-theological argument, which we more commonly call the argument from design. It is evident independently of looking at the detail of this argument that it cannot work since it attempts to move from the experience of purposes in the world to a transcendental necessary basis of all such when there is no means for reason to make the leap across such an abyss. (A621-2/B649-50)

This is the most popular of all arguments as it appeals most clearly to the natural basis of human reason involving little reference to subtle concepts. Kant exhibits the basic reasoning behind it in a set of premises (A625-6/B653-4). A problem with this proof that is unique to it is that it fails to establish, even were it valid, the concept that is supposedly being demonstrated to exist. All that would be established by this proof were it valid is that there exists an architect of the world who is capable of shaping material but not there exists a creator or supreme being. Due to this what happens is another illicit move. In presenting this argument we move from the argument about purpose to the description of contingency that is important in the cosmological proof demonstrating that the purposes could not have arisen other than on the basis of a causality of a peculiar and unique kind and thus the particular ground of the proof is abandoned and it becomes assimilated to the cosmological proof. Since the latter is in fact itself dependent upon the ontological argument there is really only one effective argument that speculative reason is capable of providing and this is, as we have shown already, defective.

The basic ground of the problem with all attempts at a rational speculative theology is once again asserted by Kant to follow from the fundamental principles of the *Critique*: “Through concepts alone it is quite impossible to advance to the discovery of new objects and supernatural beings; and it is useless to appeal to experience, which in all cases yields only appearances” (A639/B667).